

Chapter 1. Introduction and Purpose

1.1 Background

Today, there are over 1000 species that are listed as federally threatened or endangered. Over 5000 additional species are considered at risk. A comprehensive, strategic direction is needed at the federal and state levels to conserve species with low or declining populations and prevent species that are not currently listed from becoming threatened or endangered. A strategic direction will help allocate future funding resources to ensure that those often-limited resources are used effectively and efficiently.

Nationwide, many state fish and wildlife agencies have traditionally relied on funding for game species conservation through hunting and fishing licenses and federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment (Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act and Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act). This funding was responsible for the recovery of many critically imperiled fish and wildlife species, including non-game species, during the last century and continues to form the core of agency budgets.

The Endangered Species Act provides funds for federally listed species, but for state listed species agencies commonly must rely on donations and tax check-off and license plate programs to support conservation programs for rare species. Once a species has declined to the point where it is listed as federally or state Threatened or Endangered, the cost to protect or restore populations and their habitat is often far greater than would have been required to prevent their decline in the first place.

Until recently, the conservation of thousands of native fish and wildlife species that are not hunted or fished and not endangered fell into a federal funding gap. Fortunately, as we move into the 21st century, there is a new opportunity and program before us that has begun to fill this funding gap. This new opportunity is the State Wildlife Grants program – the nation's core program for preventing wildlife from becoming endangered. Wildlife, as defined by this program, is any species of wild, free-ranging fauna including fish and invertebrates. The State Wildlife Grants program provides federal funding to every state to conserve its wildlife resources. It is the only federal program that provides substantial funding to address this issue in every state. Wisconsin's participation in this program positions us to proactively conserve many species of native wildlife and their habitats.

Currently, states receive funds from the State Wildlife Grants program on an annual basis. Funds appropriated are allocated to the states according to a formula that takes into account each state's size and population. Through efforts by Teaming With Wildlife¹, work is being done to ensure that the relatively small amount of funding from State Wildlife Grants might one day grow to be comparable to the amount and stability of federal funds now provided for game species.

The task of conserving declining wildlife is certainly a challenging one, and yet we know that success is possible as we recall our history of wildlife conservation. We know that by starting early and taking proactive steps instead of reacting to crises, we can have a positive impact and avoid risky and expensive recovery efforts. Our nation's leaders believe this and want even clearer strategies put forth; therefore, in order to continue to receive State Wildlife Grants funds, each state is required to develop and submit a *Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan/Strategy (Strategy)* to the National Advisory Acceptance Team (NAAT)² by October 1, 2005. These state wildlife strategies will provide an essential foundation for the future of wildlife conservation and an opportunity for the states, federal agencies, and other

¹ Teaming With Wildlife is a broad, national bipartisan wildlife conservation coalition that includes more than 3,000 organizations. More information is available at www.teaming.com

² The NAAT is comprised of both state and federal Fish and Wildlife Service Administrators that will review *Strategies* and recommend approval, conditional approval, or disapproval to the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

conservation partners to think strategically and act on their individual and coordinated roles within their state and across the nation.

Each state *Strategy* must address eight required elements. Further, the *Strategy* must identify and be focused on the “Species of Greatest Conservation Need” yet address the “full array of wildlife” and wildlife-related issues. While Wisconsin’s Department of Natural Resources has the primary responsibility for developing this *Strategy*, you will find that Wisconsin’s effort has engaged a broad array of partners, including other government agencies, conservation groups, private landowners, the public, and others who have a stake in fish and wildlife management. The WDNR will continue to work with our conservation partners during the *Strategy*’s implementation. The *Strategy* reflects the issues, management needs, and priorities unique to Wisconsin, but we have also worked with neighboring states and others to ensure nationwide consistency and a common focus on targeting resources to prevent wildlife from declining to the point of endangerment.

The Eight Required Elements of the *Strategy*

- (1) Information on the distribution and abundance of species of wildlife, including low and declining populations as the State fish and wildlife agency deems appropriate, that are indicative of the diversity and health of the State’s wildlife; and,
- (2) Descriptions of locations and relative condition of key habitats and community types essential to conservation of species identified in (1); and,
- (3) Descriptions of problems which may adversely affect species identified in (1) or their habitats, and priority research and survey efforts needed to identify factors which may assist in restoration and improved conservation of these species and habitats; and,
- (4) Descriptions of conservation actions proposed to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions; and,
- (5) Proposed plans for monitoring species identified in (1) and their habitats, for monitoring the effectiveness of the conservation actions proposed in (4), and for adapting these conservation actions to respond appropriately to new information or changing conditions; and,
- (6) Descriptions of procedures to review the strategy at intervals not to exceed ten years; and,
- (7) Plans for coordinating the development, implementation, review, and revision of the plan with Federal, State, and local agencies and Indian tribes that manage significant land and water areas within the State or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of identified species and habitats; and,
- (8) Congress also affirmed through this legislation that broad public participation is an essential element of developing and implementing these plans, the projects that are carried out while these plans are developed, and the Species in Greatest Need of Conservation that Congress has indicated such programs and projects are intended to emphasize.

1.2 Overview of Wisconsin's Strategy

Wisconsin's *Strategy for Wildlife Species of Greatest Conservation Need* was prepared to address the eight required elements and ensure Wisconsin's continued eligibility for State Wildlife Grants. Additionally, the *Strategy* will set priorities for the allocation of State Wildlife Grant funds in Wisconsin and provide guidance and information in support of the conservation efforts of government agencies, tribes, and the full range of public and private partners.

The *Strategy* is organized into the following main sections:

Strategy Approach and Methods (Chapter 2)

- Descriptions of the interactive teams used to develop the *Strategy*.
- Overview of Wisconsin's Ecological Landscapes³ and natural communities⁴.
- Methodology used to identify vertebrate and invertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation Need.
- Methodology used to determine the associations between vertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation Need, Ecological Landscapes, and natural communities.
- Methodology used to identify threats and issues affecting vertebrate and invertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation Need and determine priority conservation actions.

Vertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation of Need Assessment and Conservation Strategies (Chapter 3)

- Results from the analyses presented by individual Species of Greatest Conservation Need, Ecological Landscape, and natural community.
- Additional analyses and summary results based on the association between the species and natural communities; probability the species occurs in each Ecological Landscape; and opportunity each natural community presents for management, protection, or restoration in each Ecological Landscape. These factors were combined to determine ecological priorities (Figure 1-1).
- Information on threats, issues, and priority conservation actions for Species of Greatest Conservation Need and the natural communities with which they are associated.

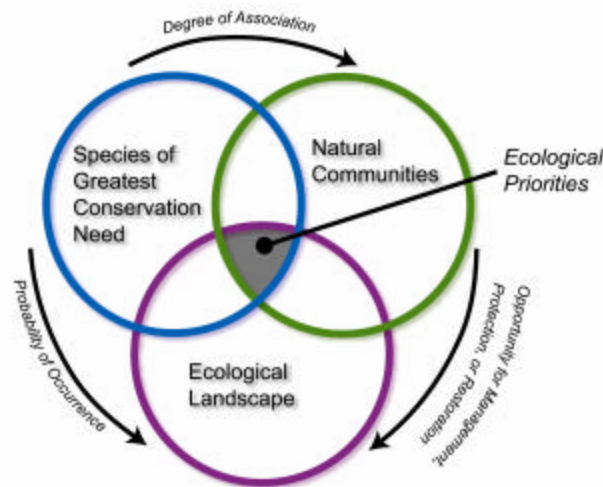


Figure 1-1. Relationship between Species of Greatest Conservation Need, natural communities, Ecological Landscapes, and ecological priorities.

³ The Ecological Landscape classification system divides Wisconsin into 16 ecologically similar regions. These regions differ from each other in ecological attributes and management opportunities. They have unique combinations of physical and biological characteristics that make up the ecosystem, such as climate, geology, soils, water, or vegetation. They differ in levels of biological productivity, habitat suitability for wildlife, presence of rare species and natural communities, and in many other ways that affect land use and management.

⁴ Wisconsin's natural communities are based on the WDNR Natural Heritage Inventory Program classification system; there are eight major natural community groups (aquatic, barrens, grasslands, miscellaneous types, northern forests, oak savanna, southern forests, and wetlands). Within these eight aggregates there are 66 more finely divided community types that are made up of collections of native plants and animals that consistently occur together under similar conditions.

Invertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation Need Assessment and Conservation Strategies (Chapter 4)

- Current state of scientific knowledge regarding Wisconsin invertebrates.
- Threats and issues affecting invertebrates and priority conservation actions.

Monitoring (Chapter 5)

- General purpose and strategy for monitoring the Species of Greatest Conservation Need and their habitats, and approaches for monitoring priority conservation actions.

Public Participation and *Strategy* Coordination (Chapter 6)

- Public involvement process used and coordination efforts with other agencies, tribes, and conservation partners.
- Strategies for the continued coordination and involvement of various conservation partners and interested parties in the implementation, review, and revision of the *Strategy*.

Strategy Review and Revision (Chapter 7)

- Process for updating the *Strategy* in the short-term and long-term using the Adaptive Management Model.
- Topics to address in the long-term *Strategy* revision, including items that this first iteration did not address.

1.3 The Results and Benefits of Wisconsin's *Strategy*

The greatest accomplishment of the *Strategy* is the creation of a dynamic vision for the future conservation of low or declining wildlife in Wisconsin. This is the first **comprehensive** opportunity to plan for and fund programs to conserve these species and the habitats they require, both as a state and nation. Wisconsin's *Strategy* is a comprehensive assessment of our wildlife resources, developed with substantial input from experts and partners across the state; we hope that it will be used to help direct and focus future efforts to conserve and manage Wisconsin's Species of Greatest Conservation Need and their habitats.

Results

- Identifies Wisconsin's Species of Greatest Conservation Need using a series of scientific filters and methods applied to the suite of all wildlife species native to the state.
- Provides information on Wisconsin's Species of Greatest Conservation Need, natural communities, and Ecological Landscapes both individually and in combination to assist users in their conservation efforts.
- Identifies ecological priorities and associated priority conservation actions for Species of Greatest Conservation Need and the natural communities that they depend upon.
- Allows flexibility for partners and other *Strategy* users to decide whom, how, and when to implement conservation actions.
- Creates a valuable database of information that can be updated and used to track progress overtime.
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Benefits

- Helps Wisconsin to proactively conserve wildlife, especially those species which in the past have often "fallen between the cracks" in terms of both funding and conservation attention.
- Encourages a broad conservation perspective implemented through partnerships and creative approaches at local, regional, and statewide levels.
- Builds on valuable information gathered, compiled, and analyzed through past planning efforts without creating new regulations.

- Ensures that Wisconsin remains eligible for federal funding from the State Wildlife Grants Program.
- Begins the process of setting priorities for allocation of State Wildlife Grant funds in Wisconsin.
- Provides guidance and information, including a reference database, for government agencies, tribes, and the full range of public and private partners to use to support their conservation efforts.

Public, private, and individual conservation partners in Wisconsin have made concerted efforts to focus management actions at the habitat level, rather than operating on a species-by-species approach. With the evolution of ecosystem management in recent times, it has become increasingly clear that habitats (i.e., natural communities) are often more appropriate targets for conservation actions than individual species. To adequately protect the structure, function, and biodiversity of natural systems, we need to be wary of efforts that benefit one or a few species at the possible expense of numerous other species. As a result, this *Strategy* truly strives to incorporate habitat-based management, while highlighting Wisconsin's Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Doing this allows us to link species or groups of species to priority habitats that represent the best opportunities for conservation success throughout our state. We hope that Wisconsin's *Strategy for Wildlife Species of Greatest Conservation Need* will be used as a resource by the WDNR, conservation partners, and interested individuals to help conserve Species of Greatest Conservation Need and their habitats.